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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 000303

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SUBJECT: UZBEK WARLORD DOSTUM TANGLES WITH POLICE, SNUBS
RULE OF LAW

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

¶1. (C) Armed supporters of Uzbek strongman Abdul Rashid Dostum abducted political rival Akbar Bay and brutally beat him at Dostum's Kabul residence on February 2. The standoff that ensued between Dostum's supporters and police sent to the scene ended with with Bay's release and a police withdrawal at the direction of President Karzai. News of the incident has been the leading story in Afghan media. The Attorney General called the incident a criminal act. The chairman of Dostum's Junbesh party expressed surprise that the police would confront Dostum, whose position as Chief of Staff to the Commander-in-Chief of the Afghan Army technically outranks Interior Minister Zarar. The United Front spokesman characterized the police response as part of a conspiracy within the government against Dostum personally and the United Front itself. This is the latest in the pattern of violent outbursts that characterize Dostum's feudal control in the north and that punctuate the tenuous peace between the Uzbek warlord and the Karzai government. Dostum is despised by many Afghans, but has ties with the United Front, influence within the government, and committed supporters in the north. Karzai is moving carefully, but his failure to assert the rule of law sends the wrong message both to the Afghan people and to the warlords themselves. Dostum's blundering provides tactical opportunities for Karai to exploit fissures in the opposition and for reform-minded Junbesh party members to cause Dostum to loosen his grip on the party.

Dostum Loyalists Abduct Rival, Face Down Police

¶2. (C) Local and international media and the Afghan Ministry of Interior reported that around midnight on February 2 armed men loyal to Uzbek strongman Abdul Rashid Dostum stormed the Kabul residence of Dostum's political rival Akbar Bay, injuring several of his body guards. The intruders abducted Bay and his twenty year-old son, and took them to Dostum's Kabul residence where they were brutally beaten (and allegedly raped) by Dostum's henchmen.

¶3. (C) Early on the morning of February 3, more than 100 Afghan National Police officers surrounded the building containing about 50 illegally armed Dostum supporters. Occupants of the house fired on the police, but the Interior Ministry denied them permission to return fire, reportedly on direct orders from President Karzai. Dostum (whom some claim was drunk) taunted the police and threatened to continue shooting. At that point, Karzai ordered the police to withdraw. At some point during the standoff the occupants of the house released Akbar Bay and his son, who were taken to the hospital for medical treatment.

¶4. (C) Sources in Parliament claimed that Wolesi Jirga Speaker Yunus Qanooni led a delegation that negotiated Bay's release directly with Dostum. (Qanooni is an ethnic Tajik and one of the leaders of the United Front. Dostum is a member.) The United Front, which counts most of the former non-Pashtun warlords among its members, has come to Dostum's aid, calling the police response a conspiracy by "some circles within the government" against Dostum personally and against the United Front itself. Some Members of Parliament speculated that Karzai decided not to risk a shoot-out. They claim Karzai will work through the Attorney General to prosecute the individuals who inflicted the beating. Attorney General Sabit told media that the raid by Dostum was a criminal act.

Akbar Bay: Inept Opportunist with a Checkered Past

¶5. (C) Akbar Bay, an ethnic Turkman from Dostum's native Jowzjan province, is the founder and head of the Afghan

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Turkish Council (Turk Tabaran), a loose umbrella group with no formal political representation that aspires to represent all Afghans sharing a common Turkish heritage, including Uzbeks. Bay was arrested last fall, reportedly after being caught on tape plotting Dostum's assassination. He was released a week ago after spending 68 days in prison, reportedly following an intervention by Karzai mentor Sigbadullah Mujaddidi, the Meshrano Jirga Speaker and PTS reconciliation program chairman. Bay reportedly served 16 years in a U.S. prison for heroin smuggling before returning to Afghanistan, but he is evasive about his time in the U.S. and refuses to speak English.

¶6. (C) In a meeting with the Embassy six months ago, Akbar Bay requested financial support to hire a 50,000-member militia from the north -- presumably from among the ranks of Dostum supporters -- and to deploy them along the Pakistan border to prevent Taliban incursions. He sent a letter to the Embassy on February 1, 2008, soon after his release from prison, describing Dostum as a rapist, conspirator, and killer. Bay accused Dostum of burning down several homes owned by his family and of attempting to kill him. He claims Dostum maintains ties with Tahir Yuldash, an ethnic Uzbek Al Qaeda affiliate. Bay claimed that Dostum has ignored a summons from the Attorney General's Office. He is also critical of the United Front, with which Dostum is aligned, claiming it receives financial support from Russia, China, and Iran.

Reactions in the North

¶7. (C) Sayed Norullah, the Junbesh Party Chairman (and Dostum's number two), downplayed the February 2-3 incident in a meeting on February 3 with PRT Mazar-e Sharif, calling it a "verbal altercation," saying Dostum's men acted "in self defense," and suggesting that the police response was part of a "conspiracy." In media reports on February 4, Norullah expressed surprise that police would surround Dostum's home, saying Dostum "holds a higher position" in the government

than Interior Minister Zarar. (Dostum holds the largely honorific post of Chief of Staff to the Commander-in-Chief of the Afghan Army.) Media report that a spokesman for Dostum, Mohammad Alem Sayeh, warned of unrest if police try to arrest him. Dostum's ability to mobilize supporters is evidenced by UNAMA reports on February 3 that about 1,000 Dostum supporters had gathered in Maimana, Faryab province, in front of the local headquarters of Dostum's Junbesh party. Local Junbesh leadership in Sar-i Pol, Jawzjan, and Kunduz also held meetings to plan peaceful protests in support of Dostum. Protesters in Takhar reportedly called for the dismissal of Interior Minister Zarar.

Government of Afghanistan Reaction

18. (C) Karzai would be happy to see Dostum neutralized politically, but lacks the confidence or muscle to achieve it. Many Afghans -- including many Uzbeks -- would welcome bold action by the government, even as Junbesh hard-liners would stir up supporters in parts of the north. Even moderate Muslims regard Dostum as an apostate. Pashtuns despise him for his brutal treatment of Taliban prisoners during the war. There were several demonstrations in support of Dostum in the north during the showdown with the police. Dostum does enjoy support among the Uzbeks, and some who do not actually support him would still resist action against an ethnic leader. Dostum also is protected by the Turkish Embassy here, which has accepted the thankless task of trying to keep him under control. They claim that, under their tutelage, he is on balance a force for moderation.

19. (C) The Dostum case is in the hands of the Attorney General, but neither Dostum nor any of his men are in custody. Karzai has told the Ambassador that he will leave the case to the judicial authorities.

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